

For the Trappist monks, learning to keep mute sometimes seemed the harshest discipline of all—until the rule of silence was revised. Suddenly, what was there to say?

FINDING WORDS

On a calm summer's evening at Cape Enrage, New Brunswick, the muddy waters of the Bay of Fundy lick with no appetite at an impossibly wide beach, and the only sound to be heard is the haunting toll of a distant bell buoy, rocked gently by the world's lowest tide. Then a car drives up the cliff-top road, assaulting the stillness with its engine and with the opening and closing of its doors. A couple of young tourists — their Chevette has Quebec plates — step out into the silence. For a moment they stand and look and listen, awed, but only for a moment. As if the soundlessness is a hostile force launching itself against them, they are shocked into retaliation, chattering about the beauty, tittering at some private joke, clicking their cameras to capture, master, control the scene. Then they get back into their car and head west in search of supper, and people, and noise.

Were they instead to drive north for three hours, the couple might come upon a thick-walled grey stone building near Rogersville, the home of twenty-eight men who are not frightened by silence, nor in awe of it, nor yet in love with it, but who simply embrace it as a matter of daily routine. The only sound to be heard at this time of night is the swish of their robes as each man files past the head of the household and bows to receive a sprinkling of holy water. After that, not a whisper until the group reassembles, at 4:15 a.m., for the first prayers of a new day.

The visitors would have no trouble finding the abbey of Notre-Dame du Calvaire. Pointing the way from Highway 126 is a large black-and-white sign that says, economically enough, "TRAPPISTES." Trappists are men of few words.

Between the Acadian shore and the plains of Manitoba are five Canadian Trappist monasteries — 152 monks in all. Until the late 1960s when change, blowing like a hurricane through the Catholic

by IVOR SHAPIRO

photographs: DEBORAH SAMUEL





Church, carried off almost every rule by which they lived, the members of those monasteries were men of virtually no words at all. The older ones still remember an age when the cloistered life was one of almost unmitigated rigour. They slept on straw mattresses on the floor of a common dormitory, went cowed and bent-headed, keeping "custody of the eyes," wore habits and underclothes of coarse sacking, and rose before dawn to divide their days between solemn chanting in the chapel and manual labour in the fields. At meal times, to the drone of readings from a sacred book, they ate boiled vegetables and bread.

And apart from the chanting, they maintained a discipline of almost total muteness. It was a matter of simple obedience to the sixth-century *Rule* of St Benedict, basis of all the Roman Catholic Church's contemplative monastic life. Trappists had taken it quite literally on most matters since 1892, when the zealously ascetic followers of the long-dead Armand Jean Le Bouthillier de Rancé, abbot of the Cistercian monastery at La Trappe, won Vatican permission to establish themselves as an independent "Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance."

"No matter how perfect the disciple, nor how good and pious his speech," St Benedict had instructed, "he rarely should be given permission to speak for: 'In much speaking, you shall not escape sin' (Prov. 10:19). The master should speak and teach, the disciple should quietly listen and learn."

And so they did, communicating, when necessary, by means of authorized signs. To ask "What time is supper?" a visiting monk might make a turn of his hands in front of his body with a questioning look on his face (*what?*), then place his fists together with the little fingers extended (*hour*), then bring a thumb, forefinger, and middle finger to his mouth several times (*eat*), and finally place the tip of his right forefinger over his closed right eye (*evening*).

Even the use of the sign language was firmly restricted to "necessary" communication. For using too many signs, or any signs considered inessential, a brother would be reported to the Chapter of Faults, where everyone's minor transgressions were publicly "proclaimed" by his brothers or by himself, so that his superior could issue a suitably humiliating penance. For the deadly sin of pride, the root of needless signs, a monk might be ordered to lie in the doorway of the refectory while the other monks stepped over him on their way to a meal.

The Chapter of Faults was an exception to the rule of silence, which was not quite absolute in any case, as Brother Henry, guest-master at Rogersville, found out when he was an eager teenage recruit in 1958. He asked his novice-master what he should do if he were drowning in a lake: should he try to jump up and down in the water, making the sign for "please aid me" (drawing both hands from the centre of the chest to the sides, like the first step in putting on an apron)? The answer was curt: "No. You shout for help."

In general, though, the monks held their tongues, doing everything together but wordlessly, moving through their days in a kind of mute lock step. Two monks might work side by side for decades, sitting next to each other in chapel and at table, sharing the common dormitory, and exchanging occasional smiles and signs. But they could not know the names of each other's home towns, or what each had done for a living — or for pleasure or passion — before entering the monastery, or indeed anything that was stored in the other's memory.

For some temperaments, entering into the discipline was hard. Father Jean Doure, superior of the English-speaking branch house in Orangeville, Ontario, was fresh out of high school when he joined Canada's largest Trappist community, Oka, near Montreal.

A trained psychologist, he later told a researcher, with simple force: "I was very lonely." It took him nearly three months to master the sign language that would allow him to ask even simple directions and nine months to learn the names of the other 120 monks. He did this by studying a group photograph and trying to match the faces and names with the men he saw around him. During his first year and a half, he spoke aloud to only three people: the abbot, the submaster, and the novice-master. "Literally. Just three persons."

On the other hand, Father Alexander, a pulp-mill labourer from Miramichi, arrived at Rogersville when he was twenty-one and lived by the old rules for nearly forty years. When his mother died while he was a novice, and when his sister died two years later, he was not allowed to leave the cloister to attend the funerals. But Father Alexander says he didn't mind, he knew the rules when he entered the monastery. At times, maybe when feeling especially happy or sad, he would long to talk, but he cannot now remember an instance.

Most Trappist monks aged sixty or over have spent more than half their adult lives in this harsh, eerie world, and to sift through their tales and their store of memories is to gain some intriguing insights into the relative importance of talking and being talked to.

Brother Daniel was in his thirties, a clerk in a Montreal office, when he paid a few visits between the wars to the famous cheese makers at Oka and "got the idea that maybe I had a vocation to this sort of life." A simple man with simple beliefs, Daniel worried about dying and meeting his Lord: "He might say, 'You're a very poor servant, you don't know how he will disapprove of you.'" To try to avoid that fate, he entered the monastery in 1944, and today he bears unmistakable marks of twenty years without practice in the art of conversation. Searching for an answer to a difficult question, the monk resorts to whistles and ejaculations. "My goodness" is an essential part of every second sentence. As a novice, did he ever have second thoughts about whether this life of silence was for him? "It was kind of a tough tussle you know, woaaa. . . . The thing that helped me was I was so worried that they would say I couldn't stay. That kept me hanging on."

For Brother Daniel, the only acknowledged cost of silence was straight information. He remembers going to the novice-master one day to ask him for permission to see a doctor. While he waited in an anteroom, another monk went in ahead of him making the sign for "just a minute." The minute extended until the bell sounded for chapel. Days went by before Daniel got to see the doctor, and even then he was not allowed to converse with the physician, so the sick monk never learned what was wrong with him.

"My goodness, you gotta get used to a lot of things, you just put up with it," says Brother Daniel.

"You'd be surprised how much you communicate without talking," says Father Canisius, who lived at Oka under the old rule but has since moved to the branch house in Orangeville. He remembers a day in the garden of the monastery at Oka, when he was weeding carrots. "There was a young man who worked there. . . . From the first day he saw me I had known he was more at home near me than with any of the others." Secular employees had to respect the monks' muting rule, but when this particular labourer chose on this day to bring a cup of water to Father Canisius, there seemed something special about it. "Just the way he presented the cup was all the difference in the world, just his passing by was a world of communication. And when he handed me a basket of berries, just the press of a thumb. . . ." Suddenly, the seventy-seven-year-old cheeks are soaked with tears.

Canisius and the lad corresponded for a while after the boy left his job at the monastery and got married, then they lost touch. But "for a few years," the old monk says, "our friendship filled up a part of my life."

It is stories like these that provide the insights: monks themselves don't often question the silence they have embraced, and are surprised that anyone "in the world" could be interested in doing so.

Like written language, speech — oral symbolic language — is apparently unique to humans. "In the world," it is so central a fact of life that its functions and uses are taken for granted. All the same, it seems clear that we were born to talk — and listen. The brain is wired at birth to learn to speak words and, as long as the process is systematically triggered by hearing language spoken, speech develops.

We actually think in words. Young children automatically "talk things through" while playing ("Vroom, vroom, here comes the airplane, coming down, down, down, look out down there. . ."), even when they think they are unobserved. As the child gets older, the verbalizations become more abbreviated and more personalized, less like the language the child uses in dialogue with others. At Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania, educational psychologist Mary Rohrkemper has watched grade-school children gradually suppressing their need to speak their thoughts out loud. She has listened to sentences getting softer and more truncated, slowly going underground and becoming silent thoughts. The child, she says, becomes aware that it is socially unacceptable to talk to yourself: "The grade two or three teacher comes around and taps them on the shoulder and tells them to stop whispering as they read." But Rohrkemper and her colleagues are convinced that what they are listening to while children learn is as close as anyone has come to hearing human thoughts.

The lifelong interior monologue can no more be stilled than thought can be stopped. But speech aloud can — as the old Trappist regime demonstrated — be consciously renounced. The question is, at what cost? Were they sacrificing much or little when they chose to live together in silence?

The psychologists say that, in large part, a healthy person's identity is shaped and continually confirmed through the exchange of language. Without interaction with other people, how can anyone know with certainty who he or she is, or is becoming? "Your sense of self is formed by seeing how other people respond to you," says Don Rubin, a psycholinguist who teaches in the University of Georgia's department of speech communication. "That's how you find out who you are. That's your anchor in reality."

Indeed many Trappists seem instinctively to flinch from people, exhibiting a painful shyness with visitors. A seventy-eight-year-old monk, instructed by his superior to answer a stranger's questions about the four decades he spent in the monastery under the old rule, would far rather be asked to sweep out a barn. He sits for the interview in the manner of an anxious student conducting a doctoral defence, leaning slightly forward in a straight-backed chair with tightly clasped hands, meeting questions with brief replies that always end with appealing glances first to his inquisitor

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and then to the doorway out.

But for other Trappists a confident sense of self seems to have been easier to maintain. Father Canisius, a member of the community at Orangeville, doesn't suffer from shyness: ask him a question, and you'll have to shout him down if you want to speak again within half an hour.

Canisius says he has always loved to talk. As a Jesuit priest of thirty-five, teaching classics in one of that order's schools, he had what he now calls a midlife crisis. His decision to join the Trappists shocked his friends. They said he would go crazy without conversation, and he wondered at first if they might be right. "Well, I was only there for one day and I was at terce . . . when I realized, 'It's all I need' — our office was sung out loud, we used our mouths — 'that's all I need, I'll be fine.'" Choir, Canisius says, provided a "safety valve" for him.

Just how using lips, tongue, lungs, and glottis for the communal chanting of

psalms could satisfy a compulsion to talk is hard to understand. But there are demonstrable links between speech and physiology, and James Lynch, author of *The Language of the Heart: Human Body in Dialogue*, believes he has found one that points towards a profound interrelationship.

Lynch, a Baltimore doctor, discovered that framing words quite literally raises the blood pressure, and that this has little to do with whether the discussion is friendly or unfriendly. Even reading aloud a passage of a favourite book sends the blood pressure skyrocketing. The link was detected only when computer monitoring became available — until then, patients had to stop talking so that a doctor or nurse could listen to the blood pumping. Everyone's blood pressure is raised by attempts to communicate, Lynch says, and that includes deaf people who use sign language instead of the spoken word. In fact, Lynch believes, high blood pressure in many people is mainly a disorder of communication.

But if the language process is physically stressful, it seems that the obvious remedy — staying mute — is no less so. One of the more urgent uses of speech is to express feelings; the penalty of bottling them up instead is what psychiatrists call disordered affect, and this takes its own bodily toll — in ulcers, or clinical depression, or worse. Most dangerous of all is unexpressed anger.

The old monks knew a lot about that. Like any other people living at close quarters day after day, they got peeved with one another. One might have a noisy way of walking into the dormitory, or be sloppy at work or at table, forcing others to clean up after him. He might sing off key, and loudly, in choir — no small offence against a community far more preoccupied with achieving liturgical beauty than agricultural productivity. The vocabulary of the Trappist sign language was hopelessly inadequate as a means of dealing with such grievances.

Besides, it was not "necessary" to express feelings spontaneously. Quite the contrary. A brother who got irritated with a fellow was expected to swallow his anger for the sake of his soul. Only for the sake of the other's spiritual welfare was complaint — to the superior or to the Chapter of Faults — countenanced.

Either path could turn minor resentments into major problems. The Chapter of Faults, one of the few opportunities for monks to

speaking to each other, was intended to assist brothers in being self-critical. In practice, it was the frequent scene of "wars of proclamation" in which Brother X would stand up and "proclaim" (accuse) Brother Y for some minor transgression, and Brother Y, while expressing nothing but penitence for his fault, would begin immediately seeking an opportunity to retaliate.

In the absence of speech, actions were the only way to get revenge. Some means would be found to get back at the offender: maybe by selecting a small, or dry, piece of cheese when dishing out food in the refectory, or by giving him a rotten apple. What was worse than getting the bad food, Brother Daniel says, was knowing it was a hostile act and having no way to discuss the problem and perhaps resolve it.

A monk must learn to smile at someone whom he feels like insulting, says Dom Alphonse Arsenault, a Maurice Chevalier figure, everyone's favourite grandfather, who has been abbot at Rogersville since 1960. A monk learns, he says, that it is not necessary to voice emotions.

"A brother may need to be corrected," he concedes, "but we should be careful not to do it angrily."

"Don't you ever just explode?"

"I try not to. But, yes, occasionally I do speak in anger."

"Can you tell me about one time when you found yourself speaking in anger?"

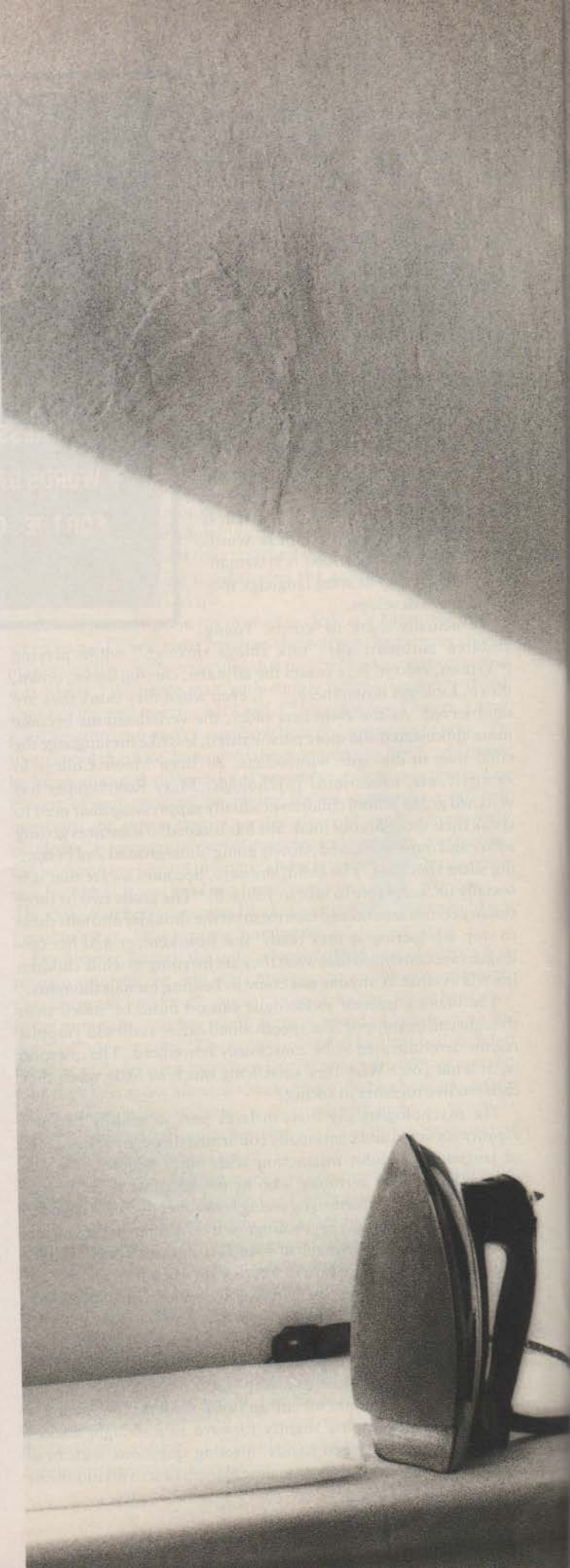
There is a long pause. The abbot draws breath to speak, then stops himself, smiles at his visitor, and ducks his head. "Maybe I would be ashamed."

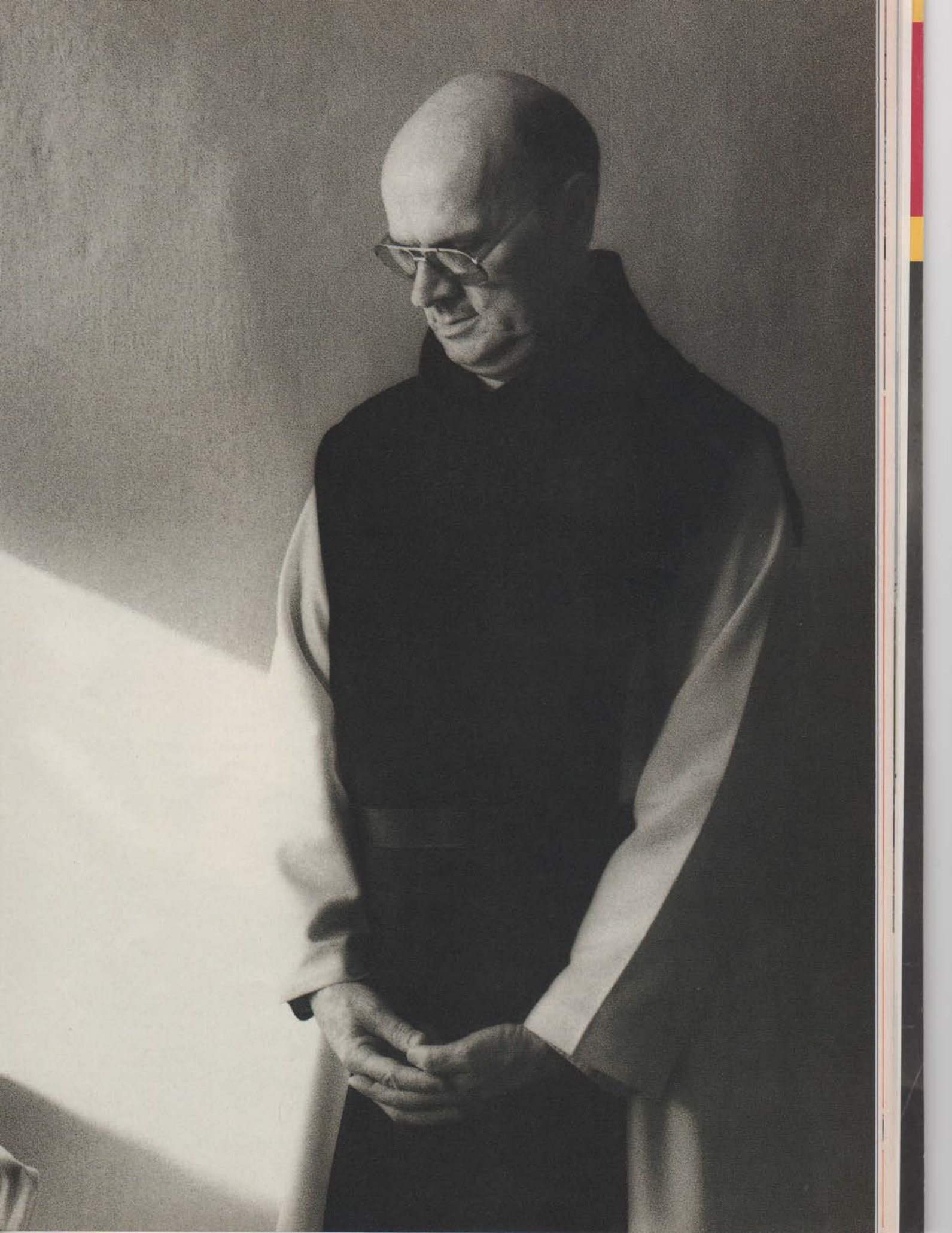
When Dom Alphonse travelled from Rogersville to Cîteaux, France, to join his fellow abbots from around the world for an epochal meeting, in the spring of 1967, he was one of many who had become aware of psychological and practical reasons to loosen the tongues of the monks. "Silence was in great need of renovation in our monasteries," he says. "We are imperfect, and we are a burden one to another always, though we try to be charitable."

The General Chapter meeting at Cîteaux was faced with the task of figuring out the order's response to a request from the Second Vatican Council. The council had urged all religious communities to undergo an "appropriate renewal," involving "two simultaneous processes: (1) a continuous return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind a given community and (2) an adjustment of the community to the changed conditions of the times."

At the top of the abbots' agenda was addressing the place of *le silence* in the contemplative life. Many abbots had begun to realize that there was no difference in principle between signing and talking, that signs were merely more frustrating and less communicative. The sign language fostered "external" noiselessness, but created stresses that interfered with the "interior" mental stillness which is the contemplative's true goal. At the end of their discussions, a critical question was put to the vote: "Are you opposed to authorizing brief conversations among our Religious without having to ask permission?" Forty-eight of the seventy-three abbots said no, they were not opposed.

One might expect that the moment the change came into effect would be etched into the monks' minds forever. In fact, many have no memories of it at all. The ruling did not come as a surprise, and as early as the mid-sixties the scent of change had encouraged some monks to start illicitly inserting bits of speech among their signs, a practice that was increasingly tolerated. Even after the abbots' historic vote, the conversion of the rule was handled with caution. At Oka, a "brief" conversation was initially defined as a maximum





of two minutes, and the monks were reintroduced to the art of conversation through small-group discussions on aspects of faith.

To help monks cope with the trauma of change, some U.S. monasteries hired communications consultants, and one of them, a Western Michigan University professor named James Jaksa, later co-authored a collection of some monks' verbatim reflections on the old life and the new, under the title *Voices from Silence: The Trappists Speak*. Though Jaksa says the monks found it hard to adapt to the new rule, most of their stories do not testify to great upset. One brother tells of being "terribly frightened and nervous" when he learned of the impending change, afraid to hear his own voice saying "Hello." Another speaks of his difficulty in thinking of anything to say. Some monks dared only whisper at first. Others indulged in a burst of garrulity, though it quickly subsided. A few were dismayed to meet certain of their fellows as individuals at last: unexpected differences of viewpoint were exposed, personality clashes developed. Others seized the opportunity to sort out old misunderstandings.

In a way, though, they treated the new dispensation as incidental. After all, their goal remained as before: not to get to know one another but to invite the silence in which they might know God. But their anecdotes and recollections make the whole book a testament to the personal and communal costs of the old rule.

Here is a monk recalling how devastated he had been when one of his fellows stopped smiling at him and began, instead, to stare. He finally came to realize that the monk who kept staring was losing his mind, but meanwhile: "Those stares just wiped me out. After a while I couldn't even manage a smile. And that's all we had — the smile."

Here is another monk, who had contemptuously dismissed speech as superficial, a device used by people "in the world" to hide from self-knowledge — until the time came when he thought he was going insane: "You see these people around you but they aren't anything to you in reality. You're all by yourself."

Here is Brother Norbert, who walked blindly out of Sunday Mass, one day ten years after he had joined the order, and went to the infirmary, where the doctor put him wordlessly to bed and prescribed medication. Next day the abbot came to ask, "What's wrong? What's the problem?" And Brother Norbert found himself crying out what he had never even consciously thought: "*I don't know anybody. I don't know anybody.*"

The tales that betray crises of grief, loneliness, depression, depersonalization, feelings of inferiority, or convictions of inadequacy — all faced without even the possibility of emotional support — are not universal but they are especially telling in light of the order's ethos, with its firm discouragement of negative emotions. The monks are more comfortable speaking positively — about the benefits of the new freedom.

Many of them mention an increased sense of community and brotherhood, though they are less than analytical about why this should be so. Still, when Jaksa distributed a questionnaire to the monks of five abbeys, three-quarters reported "heightened self-knowledge" and — strikingly — "an increase in thought pro-

cesses." One comment in the book casts an oblique light on this. Asked to evaluate the effect of enforced silence on the monks, Father Regis Tompkins, prior at Genesee Abbey, in New York State, said: "It was no good. Look what it did. It made children of them."

Father Charles joined the community at Oka as a twenty-year-old former army officer and survived the old rule for more than two decades. But he didn't like it. "In itself," he asks, "what does it give you, just to keep silence because you have to? Not much." It is Father Charles who makes the important human distinction: "The first word of the *Rule* of St Benedict is not 'Be silent,'" he says. "It's 'Listen.'"

Father Charles is held in some awe by his brothers as a religious who spends many hours kneeling motionless before the Blessed Sacrament. Yet, on a sunny afternoon more than twenty years into his order's renaissance, he is an enthusiastic advocate of conversation. "We don't draw closer to God by becoming less human," he says. "If you lose your anger or something like that, maybe it would help. But not losing your humanity."

When the sixties forced the Trappists to revise their idea of what could be given up without surrendering humanity itself, they did not content themselves with half measures. The entire book of Usages was thrown out, and the General Chapter issued instead a Statute on Unity and Pluralism which allowed each monastery to replace the hallowed customs, once followed uniformly throughout the world, with a few local guidelines and a new emphasis on following the spirit, rather than the letter, of Benedict's *Rule*. The Chapter of Faults was abolished everywhere. Superiors were encouraged to consult with their communities before issuing instructions, and cooks were urged to ensure adequate nutrition for brothers (meat is still seldom tasted, but fish, eggs, and dairy products are common fare).

But the abbots' bravest decision at Cîteaux undoubtedly concerned not lunch but language. Though it took them a while to appreciate and exploit it, what the monks had been given was a discretion that they had not enjoyed since their teens: the freedom to decide when and to whom to speak, and when to be silent.

Where once the Trappist rules seemed prison-like, or worse, the new conventions would be better compared with those of a busy city office. In both places, excessive chat is a waste of time, an unwarranted disturbance of another's priorities. And just as there are some times and places in the office where no voice is heard unless there is a very good reason (close to deadline; outside the boss's door), conversations are regulated by time and place in the monastery too: they are allowed only in the daytime and never in the "regular places" (that is, the places mentioned in Benedict's *Rule*: the chapel, the refectory, the chapter). In fact, many communities define special areas where talking is allowed (rather like offices that designate zones of indulgence for smokers).

The intended effect of the reform is that a monk should ponder before speaking. Does this need to be said? And does

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it have to be said now, and here? But even after twenty years the order has yet to clarify for itself what constitutes a “necessary” conversation. Some monks think it is a matter of practical efficiency: if a task can be achieved more easily with the aid of communication, then a quick utterance is called for. Others feel it can be equally needful just to chat sometimes, to relieve tension.

Father Robert, an animated, bespectacled Acadian of eighty-seven who became a Trappist when he left school in 1932, says an unnecessary word is one that has no purpose apart from filling a gap, making noise. So is “hello” a useless word? No, that’s “a very useful word, a very beautiful word,” he says with an oddly enthusiastic gleam in his eye. “I find that a very handy word. Right away it expresses, ‘I’m glad to see you, how are you?’ et cetera, everything, it says everything.” Yet for other monks, a passing greeting is a pointless invasion of privacy.

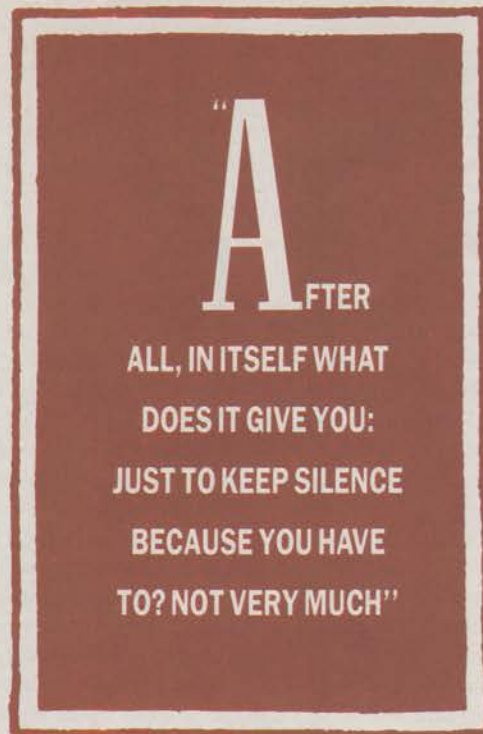
That the Trappists have been unable to come to grips with the notion of a necessary conversation, even after more than two decades, is perhaps unsurprising: conversation remains, after all, peripheral to attaining the peace that passes understanding. The precondition of that peace is what they call “interior silence.” Novices are taught that beyond holding their tongues there is a greater quietness, compared with which the mere lack of noise has nothing to commend it. To achieve true peace, what must be stilled are the voices within their own minds.

That is no easy task. By the time a youth enters a monastery, he has been thinking for twenty years or more, so a monk’s attempt to sweep his mind clean of words is more than a chore. One young monk who says he has nevertheless from time to time managed to empty his mind describes the resulting state as “crushing,” and “crucifying.” But he says that’s the whole point: deep inside every person there is an emptiness, and “instead of seeking to fill it with music or McDonald’s hamburgers or other people or whatever, the monk seeks to fill it with God. On purpose the monk puts himself in a position to be crushed.” As the contemplative manages to stifle not just the urge to speak aloud but the rationalizations and bubbling emotions that fill the mind, “we can begin to discover the essential poverty of what we are. We are nothing.”

That willingness to be “nothing” in the face of the divine “everything,” that intent to self-devaluate, is an unavoidable obstacle in the way of a Trappist seeking to appreciate the full necessity of words. He sees spoken language as a convenience in his communal life, and as a way of expressing fellowship and shared humanity — Christian love. But it has a function — arguably its most urgent function — to which he is deaf and blind: “in the world,” speech is exploited for its potency.

As Don Rubin tells his speech-communications students in Athens, Georgia, speaking is a crucial way to exercise some influence over the world. Even when a child yells out, “Watch me, Daddy” — or exclaims “Guess what! Guess what!” — she is practising the vital art of wielding control, asserting her human right to be seen, to be heard.

By contrast, life in the monasteries of old was calculated to eliminate each individual’s control over his environment. “You felt



a bit like an automaton,” recalls Father Charles, because not just singing but dressing and shaving and eating were done in unison. The tight schedule, the accent on penance and obedience, and the overarching uniformity were enough to erode individuality: with a law against speech, the monk’s impotence, his sense of being an object rather than a subject, was about as complete as it can be.

“Whenever I speak,” Rubin says, “there is a subtext that says, ‘Here I am.’ I’m trying to get you to notice me as an individual, and through my words I make you acknowledge my self.

“When I am silent, when I don’t speak, I’m not forcing you to acknowledge me and I may be submerging my ego, submerging my sense of self to some other power, to whomever has the power in the conversation.

“So in a way, to take a vow of silence is to take a vow of powerlessness.”

To which a contemplative’s response might be: Amen. His gratitude for God’s love moves him to surrender all his power to the divine power. In Thomas Merton’s memoir, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, the most famous Trappist of all told of coming to this point of commitment. The priest who had guided him through his conversion to Catholicism had only one question: “Are you sure you want to be a Trappist?”

“Father,” Merton answered, “I want to give God everything.”

At four in the morning, a solitary monk stands by his stall in the chapel, his head bowed. Dawn is an hour away, but the man’s white alb and white hair glow in the dimly lit sanctuary. He stands motionless, and for five endless minutes an absolute noiselessness, rare even in this place, presses into every corner of the room. Then another monk glides in, stands for a moment in the doorway, bows to the tabernacle of the Blessed Sacrament, crosses himself slowly, and swishes to his stall. Another enters, and then a half-dozen more. The rest of the community is at work, like farmers everywhere, doing whatever farmers do before daybreak.

Seigneur, ouvre mes lèvres: et ma bouche publiera ta louange. The chant is simple, but more melodic than its Gregorian grandfather. The gentle French vowels and rolling consonants wash through the night, the low voices in near-perfect unison, pausing in the middle of every verse, hitting the next note together every time. Every few minutes, the monks swish forward and their psalter pages flutter, but the singers know their lines, know these psalms that have been sung since long before Christ was born. And after each, the little hymn of praise to the Trinity that is sung dozens of times a day: *Gloire au Père, et au Fils, et au Saint-Esprit, au Dieu qui est, qui était, et qui vient, pour les siècles des siècles. Amen.*

The verses roll softly on, hauntingly, the diction clear, the bodies — some long and thin, some shorter and fatter, some youthful, some stooped — united, stepping forward together, bowing together, sitting together, standing together, the faces unsmiling. This is the serious business of the monastery: God is being praised. As He is praised, and in the same words, God is speaking. The echoes of His words will sound in uncluttered ears through the silence of the hours of the day, and the men will listen, and hope to hear what it is He is saying to them. ~